

PART III

Creating Multicultural Classrooms



Facilitating Intercultural Communication in Parent–Teacher Conferences: Lessons From Child Translators

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María was a fifth grade student when the authors met her in a study of immigrant child-language brokers. Her family immigrated from a farming community in Mexico to a Chicago suburb where there were limited bilingual resources. María's mother did not speak fluent English, and María's teachers did not speak Spanish, so María often served as a translator during parent–teacher conferences.

How did María navigate her role in an event often considered the cornerstone of home–school communication (Hanhan, 1998)? In this article we share what we learned from our longitudinal research, which is reported in more detail in previous studies (see García–Sánchez & Orellana, 2006; Orellana, 2009). We hope these recommendations will help teachers understand the complexities of translation, and how to facilitate parent–teacher conferences when their students serve as translators.

The “Work” of Child Translators

The complexities of interpretation work are often not recognized, as people assume translation is easy for bilinguals. We therefore begin by highlighting three reasons why this work is complex, particularly when children translate during their *own* parent–teacher conferences.

The conventional model of translation is that of a conduit (Reddy, 1979) in which translators are expected to move words and ideas from one language to another without influencing them in any way. But such impartiality is a veritable impossibility. Translation work requires being a good listener and speaker in two languages, and the ability to convey things in ways that are appropriate for different audiences. Translation work also involves other cognitive abilities, including memory skills, the ability to paraphrase, summarize, and distinguish between main points and secondary ones. Interpreting entails sensitivity to the social context and sophisticated transcultural skills (García–Sánchez, 2009; Reynolds & Orellana, 2009), such as awareness of institutional expectations, of speakers' social identities and beliefs, and of socio-cultural norms regarding what is appropriate or not in certain social situations.

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Second, child translators mediate between parties that often hold different values and views of the world. These include differences in what parents and teachers believe children should be allowed or expected to do, what schools and teachers are responsible for, and how competencies and behaviors should be judged. Child translators must balance these differing views, and recognize the differences in the value systems. Many immigrant parents are unfamiliar with the structure and practices of American schools (Moles, 1993), and their children must grapple with how to explain institutional norms. This is particularly the case when institutional ethos clashes with parents' schooling experiences.

Mediating between different expectations can also be difficult because these values are often expressed in technical terms related to standards or curricular guidelines. Sometimes, words in different languages may have similar but not exactly the same meanings. Or they may be cognate words that look very similar but have different meaning. "Education" and "educación," for example, are English/Spanish cognates. Both refer to education, but "educación" encompasses a much broader sense of children's moral and ethical development than does the English term.

Third, there are additional complexities when children serve as interpreters in their *own* parent-teacher conferences. Unlike other interpreter mediated encounters, in parent-teacher conferences, child translators are asked to take on several paradoxical positions. They are the objects of evaluation, but asked to take up the voice of an evaluator. They are translators, but sometimes also participants in the exchange. They are children speaking *to* and *for* adults, but under scrutiny of two different kinds of authority figures. They are the children of immigrants, but are asked to act as institutional agents (Hall, 2004; García-Sánchez, 2009) for the host society.

Scholars who have examined non-interpreter mediated parent-teacher conferences (Pillet-Shore, 2001) have pointed out that children are often expected to remain silent while their performance is described and corrective action discussed. Children may also resort to silence during conferences when they feel scrutinized by adult authority figures (Pillet-Shore, 2001; Silverman, Baker, & Keogh, 1998). For bilingual child translators, however, silence is not an option.

Listening to Child Translators in Action

The suggestions we present below derive from our analyses of eleven parent-teacher conferences that were audio-recorded and transcribed as part of a larger ethnographic study of children's experiences as language brokers. The four children who served as child translators during the conferences we observed—Estela, María,

Junior, and Nova¹—were all children of immigrants from Mexico. Estela was observed in a conference with her fourth grade teacher and María was observed in a conference with her fifth grade teacher and with two different sixth grade teachers. Five conferences were captured with Junior's sixth grade teachers and two with Nova's seventh grade teachers.

Across these conferences, three predominant ways in which child translators communicated teachers' evaluations to their parents were identified:

- (1) Downgrading teachers' praise;
- (2) Highlighting teachers' criticisms and taking more responsibility than teachers had assigned.
- (3) Translating faithfully cause-and-effect relationships that teachers offered as explanations for their academic problems in school (García-Sánchez & Orellana, 2006; Orellana, 2009).

Given these patterns, seven guidelines for teachers who work with child translators in parent-teacher conferences are proposed.

Guidance to Teachers: Suggestions for Facilitating Conferences with Child Translators

Emphasize the Positive

When we talk to people about our research with child-translators in parent-teacher conferences, most people assume that child translators inflate reports about their performance to "look good" for their parents. Research has indeed documented that when people narrate their experiences, they go to great lengths to portray themselves in the best possible light (e.g. Ochs, Smith, & Taylor 1989). Yet the child-translators we studied did the opposite, and what most often got lost in translation was precisely *teachers' praise*. These children nearly always downplayed teachers' praise by either not translating it at all or by diminishing it.

During one of María's conferences, her teacher, Ms. Barrett, gave María specific praise about her reading level by stating, "I gave her [María] this [reading] program because I think she can handle it, the contemporary classics. It's usually for the best students in reading." María translated these comments for her mother as, "Y me dió ese program porque, porque yo soy más o menos- que puedo leer bien" [*"And she [Ms. Barrett] gave me this program because I am more or less—I can read well"*]. Although Ms. Barrett portrayed María as one of the *best* students in

¹All names are pseudonyms selected by the children.

reading, and thus selected for a more advanced program, María's translation only let her mother know that she was a good reader, not one of the best. In other examples, the child translators diminished praise by omitting superlatives such as *very* (e.g., "very well behaved" is translated "well behaved") or leaving out important adjectives (e.g., "doing a *great* job" is translated "doing well"). Often, the children left out teachers' positive remarks entirely! Additionally, children hesitated before and during translations involving praise, stammering through sentences or couching their remarks with embarrassed giggles. We interpreted the children's hesitation as moments in which they were struggling to maintain socially appropriate positions when speaking to their teachers and parents. This interpretation makes sense given the often-conflicting positions that child language brokers must negotiate (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005; García-Sánchez, 2009; Reynolds & Orellana, 2009).

Child-translators in our study *amplified teachers' criticisms* when they translated these comments for their parents. This second finding is also surprising. Just as some people assume that children exaggerate praise, they also assume that child translators minimize teachers' negative feedback. Again, the children we studied did just the opposite, taking personal responsibility for teachers' negative evaluations of their performance, even when teachers assigned none. Teachers would implicate the child indirectly and generally explained students' unsatisfactory progress as a temporary problem rather than as a result of their character. Children, however, translated these comments as though they were solely responsible for any negative feedback offered by the teacher.

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In one of Nova's conferences, his teacher spoke confidently about her expectations for improvement in Nova's test scores: "[H]e will do better on the test as his English improves." Nova translated this evaluation to his mother as: "Dice que en mis este tests que voy así como- estoy bajo" ["*She says that in my this tests that I am doing like this- I am low*"]. Nova described his performance as "low," a word his teacher did not use.

The insertion of negative evaluation was not uncommon. In another example, Ms. Salinger assessed María's math performance on tests as an inaccurate reflection of her abilities. The teacher made the tests the subject (her "math tests... don't show me what I know she knows") and distanced María from any criticism, yet María augmented the teacher's critique and made herself responsible for scoring poorly ("when I take the tests, I don't do well") Junior also made his teacher's critiques more explicit when he translated for his mother. These child translators did *not* try to make themselves "look good" in front of their parents.

This suggests that if teachers want their positive evaluations of students to be heard by parents, it is important to *emphasize the positive*. This could include repeating the same information in different ways and conveying it nonverbally.

Separate Problems From Praise

It is also important to separate problems from praise. There was a consistent structure to each of the conferences we observed. Teachers started and ended each conference with something positive about the child's progress or behavior, yet they rather quickly moved the conversation to focus on a problem. Teachers' initial presentations of problems were followed by their assessment of students, either in relation to past performance or to an academic/behavioral standard, such as meeting grade-level expectations. Teachers then suggested possible solutions, including strategies to reach institutionally-valued goals like making the honor roll or getting better grades.

This problem-focused pattern is the framework that seems to characterize the genre of parent-teacher conferences (Baker & Keogh, 1995; García-Sánchez & Orellana, 2006; Pillet-Shore, 2003). This pattern was replicated by the children, who both omitted the praise that preceded the *problem* and made the translation sound more negative than what teachers had said.

The children in our study also faithfully translated cause-and-effect relationships that teachers proposed as explanations for their academic problems. These teachers' comments, always explained in relation to school norms and expectations, required child translators to take on an institutional identity when relaying them to parents. For example, teachers often provided the children's level of English proficiency as a reason for low scores on subject area tests. Ms. Johnson explained this problem to Nova's mother during one parent-teacher conference: "[H]e will do better on the test as his English improves." Nova adopted his teacher's logic regarding his low test scores when he translated for his mother: "Dice que-que en mis-mis- este- tests- que voy así como

estoy bajo porque en mi lenguaje de- porque-porque no tengo la- el- el nivel del- del lenguaje" [*"She says that- that in my- my- tests- that I am doing like this- I am low because in my language because- because I don't have the- the- the level of- of the language"*]. Similarly, when Ms. Harrison stated, "The area of social studies, you got a C. And I think that mainly that is based on test scores from the social studies tests," her logic was accepted and translated almost verbatim by Junior: "Este- dice que así como en social studies me dio ese grado que- porque- este- las tests" [*"This she says that this way like in social studies she gave me that grade that- because of- the tests"*]. The exact translations of teachers' explanations of children's academic problems reveal how children make sense of their school experiences according to institutional expectations, particularly related to English proficiency and testing.

Given child translators' tendency to overlook praise, amplify criticism, and hone in on cause-effect relationships, teachers should be aware of how child translators structure these conversations so that positive comments are not glossed over and only negative comments relayed. Many teachers went to great lengths to emphasize the positive aspects of students' performances, particularly at the beginning and end of conferences. The structuring of the conferences around problems, however, led children to emphasize negative information and to de-emphasize positive comments.

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Teachers can work to provide better balance between the negative and the positive by deliberately separating praise from problems. If the conference begins with positive comments, teachers should pause after positive remarks and make sure students translates them before addressing problems. Teachers can ensure that praise is conveyed by asking the children to tell them what they translate to parents. Specific examples can also be helpful. For example, if Ms. Salinger wanted to praise

María's reading abilities, she could mention a specific book María read for class and describe an assignment that demonstrated María's mastery of the text. Teachers can also emphasize praise through paralinguistic cues. By smiling or nodding, teachers can convey positive messages that can be easily interpreted by parents, even without translation. It is critical that both children and parents hear these positive remarks, not just as something intended to soften negative evaluations to follow, but also as remarks worth conveying in and of themselves.

In addition to cause-and-effect explanations, children also translated verbatim teachers' projections of successful futures. During a parent-teacher conference between Mr. Nolan and Nova and his mother, Mr. Nolan discussed Nova's potential: "So when he gets his English skills to be more proficient he should be get-getting A's and B's in science." Nova translated this for his mother as: "Y que pero si- o sea si subiera mi lenguaje este yo-yo sacara A's y B's en ciencias" [*"And that but if- that is if I improved my language this- I-I would get A's and B's in science"*]. The fact that child-translators embraced teachers' positive projections, underscores the importance of teachers' words for children and parents.

Pause and Chunk Information into Manageable Pieces

The teachers observed in this study varied widely in the amount of information they expected students to translate. Some teachers broke the information down into short segments, while others spoke at length before asking the children to translate. Of course, the longer the stretch of talk, the more arduous the translation. The demands of translating become more taxing on the translator's language skills, processing capacities, and short-term memories as the amount of information to be translated increases (Gile, 2001). Although translators' memory work is usually overlooked, it is one of the most challenging aspects of translating in real-time situations. One common recommendation found in guidelines for professionals who work with community interpreters is precisely to pause frequently (Wandensjö, 2001). Chunking the information into sizeable units may also be particularly important, since most errors in translation are due to saturation of interpreters' processing capacities (Gile, 2001).

For example, Junior's teacher, Ms. Harrison, overlooked Junior's processing capacity and short-term memory when she spoke for more than 500 words without pausing before asking him to "explain that to your [his] mom." Junior's translation focused only on the very last point that Ms. Harrison made, and most of the information Ms. Harrison was trying to convey

began to offer translations hesitantly. She retreated into silence even when Ms. Salinger encouraged her to offer her opinion about issues related to her performance. Teachers should avoid evaluative comments about child translators' language competence to preclude adding unnecessary pressures.

Open Space for Parents to Ask Questions

In parent-teacher conferences in general, parents are generally positioned as receivers of information rather than active participants (Baker & Keogh, 1995; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010). When translation is involved, this may be aggravated, because parents may feel more inhibited. Howard and Lipinoga's (2010) research on parent-teacher conferences with Mexican immigrant parents showed that parents came to conferences with specific questions for teachers, but they often did not ask them because parents perceived that teachers were too busy or dismissive of their questions. Of course, teachers were likely trying to cover extensive information in a short period of time and therefore seemed rushed, yet the immigrant parents interpreted teachers' brevity as a disinterest in their contributions. In the conferences we observed in this study, teachers did invite parents' questions, but only at the end of the session. Here we stress the importance of allowing time for parents to ask questions, either upfront or throughout the conference. Teachers could also ask parents to outline their concerns at the start of the session.

Many parents also told us after the conclusion of these conferences that they actively monitored the information that their children translated by tracking tone and facial expressions of the children and their teachers. Teachers should thus be aware that, even though parents may not be overtly participating, they are actively engaged in the conversation. Using eye contact with parents, even while speaking English or while the child is translating, may help parents feel more included and aide teachers in identifying areas needing further explanation.

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We also noticed that when parents did speak, they generally adopted a critical and negative evaluative stance toward their children, and they were less likely than teachers to appeal to temporary factors to justify children's difficulties. Parents may have focused on negative aspects of children's overall school performances because these were the assessments that were most amplified by the children in their translations. Parents' comments may also have reflected the cultural values and assumptions that shaped their understanding of teachers' messages. Teachers should be mindful that families may operate with different beliefs about what children should be allowed or expected to do in school in terms of performance and behavior, what they should be allowed or expected to do during out-of-school hours, how their progress should be judged, and how much or how children should speak to adults, among other things.

One of María's conferences provides an example of differing parent and teacher beliefs. María received high marks for "participating in class discussions." However, although Ms. Salinger wanted María to tell her mother about her active and positive engagement in class, this praise was lost amidst María's mother's fears that María spoke too much in class. María's mother's equation of oral participation with being disruptive suggests that she may assume a different model of learning than that of the teacher. Paying attention to such value differences, which may also be shaped by differences in levels of education, socio-economic status, and understanding of the American school system, is imperative when explaining institutional practices and when relaying assessments of students' academic performance and classroom behavior (Lareau, 1987; Moles, 1993; Rumberger, 1987; Tse, 1996). The term "conference" in itself can create confusion for Spanish-speaking parents, who refer to such meetings not as "conferencias," but as "reuniones" or "juntas," both of which are idiomatic terms in Spanish (Howard & Lipinoga, 2010). We acknowledge that it can be challenging for teachers to recognize and accommodate the multiple and diverse backgrounds of parents, but asking and inviting questions about parental concerns can help identify where differences may lie and offer opportunities for teachers and parents to learn from one another.

Conclusion

We hope that this article provides teachers with helpful suggestions for facilitating home-school communication with immigrant parents and guardians. Although effective parent-teacher communication may seem challenging when parents are not fluent in English and teachers are not fluent in the parents' language, the most important lessons

was lost. Moreover, in this statement, Ms. Harrison made reference to complex educational terminology, including "achievement level," "grade level standards," "academic performance," "subject area," and "grade level expectations," as well as to school-related acronyms, such as "AL" for achievement level and "CWH" for civic and work ethics, all of which were lost in Junior's translation.

The latter example also speaks to the difficulties of the language that child language brokers are expected to translate. Translating from specialized vocabulary in English to corresponding terms in Spanish is likely beyond their linguistic capabilities. Therefore, teachers should be cognizant of the amount of information they expect children to convey in one turn and of the type of vocabulary they use to discuss children's performances. Unlike Ms. Harrison, Ms. Salinger fragmented the information she expected María to translate into reasonable chunks and regularly checked María's understanding of the information to be translated. She did so by posing questions at the end of most of her statements, such as, "Did you understand all that?" "Can you translate that for me?" and "(Do) you want to try this one, María?"

Check for Understanding

Teachers used various approaches to check for children's understanding of what they said and to invite clarification questions. Ms. Salinger paused frequently during her conference to ensure María's understanding of what she was expected to translate. Ms. Salinger also checked for María's understanding by asking her to tell her what she had told her mother. For example, after noting that María seemed to understand more than she could demonstrate on tests, Ms. Salinger discovered that María had just told her mother, "that I [María] need more practice. Like, um, I need to learn more." Ms. Salinger, however, was not trying to make the point that María needed to practice more, and by carefully checking María's translation and asking questions, she was able to re-explain the issue. At another point when Ms. Salinger listed several components of María's school performance, María protested, "I don't know how to say all that!" Ms. Salinger then broke her comments into smaller chunks for María to translate. An important aspect of this example is that María felt comfortable enough to let her teacher know that she needed help, thus demonstrating the need for teachers to establish trusting relationships with students serving as translators.

Minimize Institutional Jargon

Teachers also differed in how they managed school-specific vocabulary. Whereas some teachers glossed over such vocabulary quickly (see example of Ms. Harrison's

conference above), other teachers helped child translators by explaining complex terminology step-by-step. For example, Mr. Vick introduced a new report card to Estela's mother during their conference that accounted for students' progress in terms of recently-adopted "standards." After his explanation, Estela admitted she did not know the meaning of the word "standard." Mr. Vick then explained the concept to her by explaining "standard" in a quotidian way: "A standard is where we expect our kids to be at the end of the year." Of course, even then this was not an easy concept for Estela to translate. She produced a reasonably equivalent translation, but we don't know what her mother really understood about the concept of standards. Thus, taking time to *explain* important constructs is another strategy teachers should consider.

Most of the other examples in which children openly recognized their insecurities about translating something, had to do with institutional vocabulary like "standards." Often, child translators would hesitate or restart frequently when they did not understand what they were to translate. Teachers can thus also pay attention to hesitations as signals that a child is struggling to find meaning. Teachers can then rephrase their comments and talk to the child directly. For example, when Ms. Salinger wanted to tell María's mother that María was in an advanced reading program, she told María explicitly, "Tell her it's for advanced students." When María paused in her translation: "Es para niños que—" [*This is for children who—*], Ms. Salinger rephrased the term "advanced:" "It's because she's a very good reader." By paying attention to María's hesitation, Ms. Salinger was able to relay important information—and praise—to María's mother.

Conferences are Not to Test Children's Translating Skills

Although most of the teachers did not question children's interpreting abilities, we observed a bilingual administrator join a conference-in-progress and critique the child's translation. Unsolicited by Ms. Salinger, María, or María's mother, this administrator modified the child's translations by adding her own comments. Most of these add-ons did not reflect the teacher's message, but the administrator's views on education. Moreover, her comments did not offer any significant information that María had left untranslated, and sometimes veered significantly from what Ms. Salinger had said. Yet, these additions were framed for María's mother as complementary corrections of María's translation.

Regardless of the administrator's motivations, what is crucial for our discussion here is that after several turns of these "corrections," María became quiet, and

we have learned is that these barriers can be overcome when a shared space for dialogue is created and when teachers are attentive to parents and students' questions and concerns. This lesson is ever more important as numbers of English-language learners increase in schools across the United States. Child-translators do amazingly complex work, and it is important that we as educators value their talents and scaffold their participation in meetings so that they and their families can fully engage in the school community.

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